



René Clair in Hollywood: An Interview

R. C. Dale; René Clair

Film Quarterly, Vol. 24, No. 2. (Winter, 1970-1971), pp. 34-40.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197024%2F197124%2924%3A2%3C34%3ARCIHA1%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

R C DALE

René Clair in Hollywood: An Interview

R C Dale is preparing a book on René Clair, to be issued by the University of California Press, and he recently spent some months in Paris—analyzing Clair films, gathering research material, and talking with the director about his films. In the course of their conversations, Clair's thoughts often turned to Hollywood, even when discussing his French films. Dale writes: "This text is a partial summary of those thoughts, gleaned from three months of talk, sometimes translated and sometimes quoted directly, since our conversations lapsed in and out of French and English."

RC: You know, I was rather lucky in Hollywood. I worked with fine writers and pleasant people. In filming, the writing collaboration is very important—the most important one there is, as a matter of fact, since the script is the most important element of the film. If you are working with a really good writer, you can disagree freely between the two of you without any trouble. That's the only way you end up with a good script. Second-raters are dangerous. They only have one idea and they usually aren't willing to change their minds about anything. That can be disastrous. But I worked with some really fine people: Norman Krasna, Dudley Nichols, Preston Sturges, and Robert Pirosh, who was young and just beginning as a writer and who later supervised the American version of *Le Silence est d'or*.

RCD: *Dudley Nichols was quite a bear for work, I understand.*

He had unbelievable energy. I'd come into his office at 8:30 or 9:00 and he'd be waiting for me. We always started to work immediately. He never talked about anything but the script, never even mentioned the news of the war or anything like that. He'd sit at his typewriter and pound away at it as I paced the floor. At

noon they'd send in a glass of milk and a sandwich, but that didn't interrupt the work for a second. Dudley typed everything, and since we kept changing things as we worked out the scripts, he'd tear the sheets out of the typewriter and throw them on the floor. I used to ask him why he didn't write things out by hand instead of taking all that trouble with the typewriter. But he was too busy thinking about the script to give me an answer. It almost killed me, but the script for *It Happened Tomorrow* was the only one I ever saw finished in three weeks. And for *And Then There Were None*, we didn't go at a very leisurely pace, either; that script was finished in four weeks. Dudley and I were both former journalists, you know, which incidentally allowed us to have a lot of fun working details of life in a newspaper office into the script of *It Happened Tomorrow*. Maybe it was his newspaper experience that made Dudley work as if he had been writing for a deadline that was always going to come up in ten minutes.

Was your collaboration on I Married a Witch with Marc Connelly and Robert Pirosh as happy, if somewhat less frantic?

Well, to tell the truth, I worked more with Bob

Pirosh than with Marc on that script, Marc collaborated more as an advisor than as an actual writer. When I first went to work on the film, Buddy de Silva, the producer, assigned me a writer and told me that the writer would work on the script and give it to me when he had finished it. As a European director used to writing my own scripts, I couldn't quite believe my ears, so I pretended I didn't understand him. I said, "Well, when can we start?" But he was insistent: "Let him write it. Are you a writer or a director?"

I used to wonder what they paid people for in Hollywood. I even started getting lazy myself while I was shooting. I would arrive on the set in the morning and somebody would push my chair under me and I would ask what we were scheduled to shoot that day. That could never have happened to me in Europe, where most directors had to keep everything organized in their heads. Maybe it's a familiarity with European filmmaking practices that leads some European critics so far astray when they're talking about American directors. In any case, I still have to smile when I read their pronouncements on the ethics and aesthetics of certain directors because everybody who worked in Hollywood knows perfectly well that most of the time one person wrote the script, the director of photography did the framing and composition and lighting, somebody else cut the film from all of the shots they had made—the only thing many of those directors ever did was work with actors. I knew that if I ever let myself fall into that system I could never make my own kind of film again. I once told David Selznick that I could never work for him because his creative personality was too strong; he was too much of a director himself. I wanted to make my own films, not his, and I knew that it would have been very hard to do if he had been my producer. Hollywood usually thinks of directors as stage directors whose job is to take care of the actors. That is certainly a very important part of the job, but not the most important part, to my way of thinking. The writing is much more important.

Bob Pirosh and I worked very well together.

We got out what we considered to be a reasonable script for *I Married a Witch*. But the front office didn't like everything we'd done, so we changed the script considerably. After a lot of rewriting, we finally got an approval from them and started shooting. Of course, neither of us intended to shoot the approved script exactly as it had been submitted, so we would sometimes sit up late rewriting the script for the next day's shooting. And every morning Buddy de Silva would go to the screening room to watch the rushes. He had to watch the rushes for six or seven pictures every day, of course, and he certainly couldn't keep every shot of all of those pictures in his head. He liked what he saw of our film so he never bothered checking up on us to see whether we were actually shooting the approved script. It never occurred to him that we were working at night on the real script and then shooting it during the day.

So in a sense you had a free hand, although it involved a bit of legerdemain. But wasn't Preston Sturges assigned as the producer for that picture?

Yes. My agent, Myron Selznick, had sent me a book, *The Passionate Witch*. I read it and thought I could do something with it. I met Preston, who eventually became a good friend of mine—he spoke French as well as I do—and who was then the leading director at Paramount. We talked over the project and he agreed to produce it for me. Paramount had been trying to find something right for Veronica Lake, who had been receiving lots of publicity partly because of her beautiful hair. They didn't want an ordinary role for her, and Preston convinced them that *I Married a Witch* was just what they needed. That's what did it: Veronica Lake got me that job; she was a lot more important to Paramount than I was, believe me. Of course when I went to work on the picture, Preston was busy directing something else, so he didn't know exactly what was happening either.

Poor Preston, he was one of my best friends, but he was really a little too strange for Hollywood. He was raised in France, you know, born in America but raised in France. His moth-

er was quite rich and she was a great admirer of Isadora Duncan and her group of neo-Greeks. She used to wear Greek gowns everywhere, and her friends could be seen walking along the Champs-Élysées dressed in togas and sandals in the middle of winter. Poor Preston had to ride to school on his bicycle wearing a short little toga. Paris is probably the worst city in the world for that sort of thing. You can imagine what he had to go through on his way to school every day. Kids not only shouting insults at him all the time, but also throwing stones and mud and making him suffer all kinds of indignities. It's pretty hard to come out of a childhood like that and still be sane.

He was certainly one of the most talented oddballs who ever worked in Hollywood. I've noticed in our conversations that you tend to minimize the actual job of directing in your mind, and rather to concentrate importance in the fields of writing and cutting. I take it you didn't adopt the Hollywood system of multiple-angle shooting in which the scenes or sequences were actually resolved in the cutting room.

No, I've never done that. For me, after writing, cutting is the most important part of film-making. Or let me put it this way, to clarify what I mean. There are three important areas in film-making: writing the script, shooting, and cutting. If I had to abandon one of them, it would be the shooting. After all, with a bad script and a bad cutter, what can a good director do? But a cutter can often ruin a good film and sometimes even save a bad one. For that reason, I write my scripts so that in a sense I can practically cut with my camera as I am shooting. As a result, the cutting process is very easy and very obvious. I suppose you could say that I cut as I write and then again, of course, as I shoot.

When I was making *I Married a Witch*, Buddy de Silva went to see my cutter, Eda Warren, one day. He had been wondering what had been going on. He was used to seeing several thousands of feet of rushes a day from his directors, and I was only turning in maybe 450 feet a day. He couldn't figure out why I was working so slowly, and he also couldn't imagine

how my footage could be cut into coherent sequences, since I didn't make five or six different shots of every scene. So Eda Warren cut a sequence for him to show him that it could indeed be done, and he went away satisfied but surprised, and never mentioned it to me at all. And he was amazed that the picture was shot in five weeks.

It wasn't much of a secret. I simply shot exactly what I knew I would need, whereas some directors at that time were shooting everything they could conceivably turn their lens on. I was told that few of them ever came near a cutting room, and I'm always amused to read about some director's brilliant cutting, when I know for a fact that the man had never set foot in a cutting room. For the most part, supervision of cutting was the producer's business. That wasn't always true, of course; such great directors as Lubitsch and Wyler watched over their own cutting. I think the Hollywood practice of shooting a scene from lots of different angles was initiated by Irving Thalberg. In any case, I call it the Irving Thalberg School of cinema. And, you see, he was very wise, for it enabled him to control the cutting of the film himself, and if you control the cutting of the film, God knows you control the film. Thalberg could take the film out of the director's hands with no trouble at all, and cut it however he liked. That would have been very hard to do with one of my pictures because of the way it was shot.

I MARRIED A WITCH



Don't forget that, for the most part, Hollywood was a factory, set up like a bunch of plants with different people in different departments doing different things who often didn't even come into contact with one another. The Europeans who had actually made films in Europe before coming to Hollywood were pretty rare, and our methods of working were equally rare. The Hollywood system, the Irving Thalberg School, got its results in one way, we got ours in an entirely different way. There's certainly room for both methods in film-making, and I have esteem for many of the Hollywood directors who worked in the system.

I suppose the most amusing part of it is seeing critics barking up lots of wrong trees. While you were in Hollywood, did you adopt any other local practices, such as conducting sneak previews?

Well, actually, I had already conducted sneak previews in France, ten years earlier. But let me tell you about the sneak preview for *I Married a Witch*, which was very instructive. The studio maintained complete secrecy about it. Nobody knew where it would be held; the studio wanted a completely natural audience that wouldn't be affected by the presence of actors or studio people. A half-hour before the preview, a studio limousine came to pick me up to take me to the theater. The only other studio people there were Buddy de Silva, Eda Warren, and Marc Connelly.

After the show, Buddy de Silva was very happy. The audience had enjoyed the picture very much, had laughed and even applauded. He said: "It's perfect." But I said, "No, I have to change something." "You're crazy; they loved it." "Listen, Buddy, I'll meet you in your office tomorrow morning and show you what I mean." Then I started looking through the audience reaction cards. I was busily reading them when Buddy said, "Don't read them; count them." He was right, in a way. The fact that people were interested enough to fill out a card was more important than their individual reactions. There were about 200 cards, most of them quite enthusiastic. But then there was the inevitable one that said simply, "It stinks." I didn't feel bad

about that because Preston Sturges had told me beforehand that there was one man in town who went to every preview, apparently with the sole purpose of writing that opinion invariably on every card he filled out. Later Preston asked me if Mr. Stinker had been at the preview, and I replied, "Yes, and he brought his family along with him." Another card answered the question, "Did you think anything was too long?" by saying: "Yes, Veronica Lake's hair." As you can see, Buddy de Silva was right; the number of cards did count much more than what was written on them.

The next day I went to Buddy's office. He told me again that the picture was perfect, and that I was crazy to change anything. I got out the transcriptions—the records we had made in the theater the night before during the performance. We put them on his phonograph and started listening. At one point near the end, over the dialogue we could hear someone start to cough, and then somebody else, until for a while it seemed that everybody in the house was coughing. I said: "Whatever is happening there has to be changed." It was easy to figure out the location in the film from the dialogue that was also recorded on the transcription. The coughing occurred during the witch's rather poetic dialogue just before she died. Since we had been showing the workprint in the theater, it was easy to remove that part of the film when we went to cut the negative.

Those coughs were just like the cards—better actually, since Mr. Stinker wasn't thinking about what he was doing when he coughed. Individually the members of that audience could have been each one a genius. The reverse was more likely the case, but that doesn't matter at all. The audience can be a collection of imbeciles, idiots, and cretins. They may not know anything about movies, perhaps they don't know anything about anything. But by bringing them together a sort of collective genius arises from among them, a collective, spontaneous way of reacting to your film. And that genius is right, no matter how wrong each of them might be separately. When they start

coughing, you know you've lost their attention. And when you've lost their attention, it's time to start wondering what you've done wrong. The film was finished, we'd made it, we were all professionals, none of us saw anything wrong with the film. We would never have listened to any single member of that audience if he had tried to tell us that there was something wrong with the picture. But as soon as I heard that outbreak of coughing I knew that we had indeed made a mistake and that I had to correct it.

Another area of working in Hollywood that must have fascinated you was the special effects departments.

Yes, I was really nuts about special effects, and always had been. When I first started out, in films like *Le Fantôme du Moulin Rouge* and *Voyage imaginaire*, we had to do everything, absolutely everything in the camera. But since I was so fascinated by special effects, I used to do all the calculating—you know, backwind eighteen frames here, put in a matte at such and such a frame. I was really crazy about it. I remember seeing Douglas Fairbanks's *Thief of Baghdad* and DeMille's—what was it? *Ten Commandments*, I think. They had me absolutely mystified. All I could think about was the special effects. How in hell did they do that, make Douglas fly about on the magic carpet, for example? I spent weeks trying to figure it out. And when I got to Hollywood, where the special effects departments were by far the best in the world, full of old tricksters from way back, I found it hard to do anything but hang around and watch them creating their miracles. At one time, after I'd been spending too much time in the special effects department, I got a polite note from the front office saying rather euphemistically that I was welcome to supervise the special effects, but asking me not to forget about shooting the rest of my picture. They were right, of course; it wasn't my job.

So you found Hollywood receptive to your own particular variety of fantasy and use of special effects?

Not so much as you might think. I wanted to do a film of *The Flying Yorkshireman* in which

the lead character actually flies by moving his arms up and down as we do in dreams, but the whole thing fell through because I couldn't use the script as it had been written. To make it suitable and properly fantastic, I would have had to change everything, and a lot of money had already been put into it. Since the producer would have lost face if he had been obliged to admit that he had wasted a lot of money on something that didn't work out, the whole project fell through.

Nothing is more limited than the fantastic genre. You can count the basic themes on the fingers of your hands. There's the trip into the past or future, bringing the past or future into the present, ghosts, and what have you. And one thing is certain: if you work in the fantastic, you can be sure someone has been there before you. The chances are that some day someone will come up to you and say: "Hey, you stole my idea in such and such a picture."

In Hollywood, they are very cautious about that because of the legal entanglements that can ensue if you get caught copying—or even appearing to have copied. Let me tell you a story to illustrate that point. In the early forties, Frank Capra had bought a screenplay—or the beginnings of one, anyway—from two writers. Before he went any further on the project, he had the legal department research the property. They went over everything they could think of, and finally they came to just the sort of thing they had been looking for. It was in a one-act play by Lord Dunsany that had been put on in London by Ronald Colman in the early twenties. The two scripts had the same basic device: the possibility of reading tomorrow's newspaper today. But in Lord Dunsany's play the lead character reads in a newspaper the news of his own death the next day. That gave us the idea for the last part of the film. Since Capra knew very well that the Dunsany estate could have made trouble for him, he bought the rights from them, even though there wasn't the remotest question of plagiarism involved. He bought the rights to make sure nobody from the estate would sue him over that accidental resemblance. Eventually Capra sold the rights

to Arnold Pressburger, who asked me to take over the project. At first I refused, but then I reconsidered and Dudley Nichols and I redid the whole script from scratch. Even so, those two scriptwriters and Lord Dunsany got their screencredit for the "original material."

So that's how It Happened Tomorrow came to be? Somewhat the same thing happened with I Married a Witch, didn't it?

Yes, in a sense. We did an adaptation of a Thorne Smith novel, *The Passionate Witch*. But in the first place Thorne Smith died after he'd written not much more than the very first pages of the novel—somebody else finished the whole thing up—and in the second place there's practically nothing left of the novel in the film. Just to show you how little of the novel got into the film, let me tell you a little story. I started off that picture working with a very fine screenwriter in the naturalistic vein, and it soon became apparent that we shouldn't be working on that particular picture together. One day when we were trying to figure out what to do with the witch's father, he said quite seriously: "I've got it; we'll have the old witch go to Germany and kill Hitler." That's all it took to make me realize that no matter how good a writer he was for some subjects, he wasn't my man for this picture.

You've talked with great affection about three of the pictures you made in Hollywood. How about the other two, Forever and a Day and And Then There Were None?

Forever and a Day I totally disown. A group of British artists working in Hollywood at the beginning of the war wanted to make a picture as a patriotic gesture. It was a kind of donation to the British Red Cross, and of course nobody was paid. At the last minute, Alfred Hitchcock, who had agreed to do one of the sketches, decided to back out. Since the British considered I was almost one of them after having made two pictures in England, they asked me to direct that short sketch and so I agreed. But the script had already been completed, and I only partially revised it. The way it had been written, the sketch would have lasted half an hour and it would have cost a fortune to shoot. All I

really did was trim it down into reasonable proportions and make it viable. After I shot it, it was cut and recut. Don't bother to see it; it's not one of my pictures. As I've told you, all the value of a film is in the script and the cutting. This was a script written by someone else that I had only edited. And by the time the picture was released, the cutting certainly wasn't mine. It's the only film I've ever directed for which I didn't write the script. Completely uninteresting.

It probably won't make you too happy to learn that you are usually given credit for the whole film in the States, when the part you directed isn't more than ten minutes long. But how about And Then There Were None?

Pretty much the same thing. That's Agatha Christie, not me.

Or Agatha Christie told by you, maybe? I see plenty of René Clair in that film, even if it is a rather faithful adaptation. Nobody else could have signed that one.

Perhaps. But I remember seeing Chaplin one day and he said, "I've just seen *I Married a Witch*. There was no need to see the credits. In two minutes I'd have known it was your work." Now there's a real René Clair film, and those are the ones that are interesting. *And Then There Were None* isn't interesting because it isn't personal. The only interesting part of making the film was working on the adaptation with Dudley Nichols. The mystery story is full of little bluffs, little deceits that can't be presented on the screen. It was intriguing to find ways of working around them. And of course we had to change Agatha Christie's tone since we conceived the picture more or less as a comedy. But you realize that every picture I have ever made—*La Proie du vent*, to some extent *Break The News*, which I wrote for someone else, based on another film I'd seen, and then ended up having to direct in England, and the two Hollywood films we've just been talking about—every picture I have made that didn't really come out of my own heart, is a picture I'd like to disown. God knows, everybody makes mistakes. It seems to me that it should be the artist's right to destroy what he has created if

he later realizes that it isn't really his own or his best work or even simply his good work.

If I were speaking as an artist, I'd agree with you entirely, but as a student or critic or fan or whatever you want to call it, I can't agree at all. But let's return to Hollywood. Despite what your biographers, Georges Charensol and Roger Régent, describe as hard times, what with your separation from all your friends and colleagues in France as well as your difficulty in finding suitable pictures to make in America, your recollections of Hollywood seem to fire your enthusiasm and affection a great deal.

It is true that I missed my friends and my country a great deal. I could have been happier in Hollywood if I'd been there under different circumstances, but that wasn't Hollywood's fault. And the times weren't so bad as that. I could have worked if I'd wanted to, but I didn't find good subjects. Well, no, that's not exactly right. After *Flame of New Orleans*, which didn't do well at the box office, it's true that I couldn't find work. For five years, ever since the success of my first English film, *The Ghost Goes West*, I'd been getting telegrams from Hollywood: come and we'll give you anything; we can't get along without you—you know the sort of thing. But after one flop, suddenly nobody had ever heard of me. That's the polite way of putting it in Hollywood. But once *I Married a Witch* was made and well received, the responsibility for not working was entirely mine. I was on a five-year contract at Para-

mount. After *I Married a Witch* came out, they renewed my option for another year. They could renew my option, but I couldn't renew theirs. Strange system. Well, they gave me all sorts of things to read and nothing pleased me. I just couldn't find anything that was my style. It was wartime, you know, and nothing suited me; it was all wrong, not my sort of thing at all. At one point after Buddy de Silva had offered me a number of subjects that I had to turn down, he said in exasperation: "I didn't know you were such a specialist." He was really surprised that I turned down so many things because they weren't in my line. In those days, you know, they had a list of directors tacked up on a bulletin board. Whoever was free would do the next picture. They proposed, for example, that I do a very dark and sad Graham Greene story. I was horrified, and said, "No, I can't, it's not my sort of picture." The next name on the list was Fritz Lang's, so he did it, and of course he did it well. Once, after several months of inactivity—I'd been reading a lot, that is, but hadn't found anything I liked enough to begin working on—the front office at Paramount reminded me that I was being paid. That amused me, so I said, "OK, don't pay me until I work. Don't give me another check until I start writing again." The big boss was absolutely scandalized at the thought. No pay! It was a religion, that weekly paycheck in Hollywood. I had blasphemed. I don't think I could have said anything that would have shocked him more.

FRANK NULF

Luigi Pirandello and the Cinema

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Luigi Pirandello on twentieth-century theater. As the author of such plays as *Each In His Own Way*, *Henry IV*, *Tonight We Improvise*, and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, his contributions to developments in

contemporary drama are well known, and it is incontestable that he is one of the most significant of those responsible for innovations in both theatrical form and content in the first decades of the 1900's. His relationship to Anouilh, Sartre, and Camus has been clearly shown by